

ATTENTION: © Copyright The Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976, as amended must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the Iowa Department for the Blind. Excerpts up to 1000 words from the oral histories may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited. Requests for permission to quote for other publication should be addressed to the Director, Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth Street, Des Moines, IA 50309. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from the Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind. All materials cited must be attributed to the Iowa Blind History Archive at the Iowa Department for the Blind.

**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Roger Erpelding, Algona Iowa, age 61
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the Blind
2-25-2011**

Mary Clarke: My name is Mary Clarke and I am interviewing Roger Erpelding today at the Iowa Department for the Blind at 524 4th Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. The date is February 25 and the time is 1:45 pm. Roger and I were co-

workers at the Iowa Department for the Blind for a number of years. Roger also was one of my mentors when I first started working for the Department; I traveled with him. Anyway, I'm going to turn it over to Roger to talk a little bit about his growing up years and on from there.

Roger Erpelding: Well thank you, Mary.

Clarke: Oh, and Roger do I have your permission...

Erpelding: Yes, most certainly yes. I think we'll start at the beginning. I was born on December 14th in 1949, so I'm 61-years-old. I have glaucoma. I'm totally blind and I've been totally blind since 1988. So, I had some vision when I was born and the first 38 years of my life, but it was not really functional or useable vision; they called it travel vision. That's really a misnomer, but I could see large shapes; I could see large objects, and so forth, trees. I could see a tree, but I couldn't tell where the leaves were; just a big mass of green. If it was green up in the air it had to be a tree, right? Well, that kind of vision. So, it wasn't a whole lot of use. I call it fun vision or recreational vision. So, when I became totally blind, it didn't change a whole lot. I've always been a Braille reader. I've always used a cane. I've always done alternative techniques in all my life tasks. So, once that total blindness occurred; the retina detached and that was probably...we had glaucoma. You're on kind of a time bomb with your retina and nobody was surprised. What surprised me was the pain, but we'll get into that later on, maybe.

I was born in Algona at St. Ann's Hospital, Kossuth County Hospital. And, my parents farmed. My father was a

tenant farmer who moved around quite a bit. So, when I was about four-years-old we moved into a farm about two miles north and two miles west and, maybe, a quarter mile north of Laverne, Iowa in South East Kossuth County. I remember most of my growing up years on that farm. And, my folks moved from that farm in January of '66. The landlord's son got married and so that was his inherited property, so to speak. So, they notified my dad in March '65, "You have a year to move somewhere else." That was the custom and the law of farming back in those days and it may have changed. I'm not sure, but it's been a long time now.

My folks moved to Oelwein, Iowa, and my dad had a job there delivering seed corn. And, he had a large chunk of North East Iowa to deliver to. And then, that job ran out so he sold Mormon Feed for a while. In August of 1969, he became employed with the Northwestern Railroad in Oelwein and retired in '85. And, my mother was a homemaker on the farm, of course, and she did all kinds of farm activities; butchered chickens, and tended two large gardens and rendered lard and you name it. She did all those things back in the farm days. And then, we moved to Oelwein and Mom took a job as a cook in a nursing home. She was there for almost 20 years. When she was employed, she was a cook on the second shift, kind of a kitchen assistant. When she retired in '85, she was the head cook. So, my folks have a hard working background and they've imparted that on me, I hope.

The blindness issues at home were kind of funny. There were things that my mom and Dad let me do that, to this day, are kind of out in the forefront. For example, one of my jobs was to gather and to burn all the stuff on the farm and I loved that job. I came up with papers. I know when I was

growing up we had a bunch of old tree stumps that had rotted out and my brother and I went with a big green wheelbarrow and picked up all those tree stumps that had rotted out. I put them in great big piles and burned them. We burned papers; we burned all kinds of good stuff back in those days and my Aunt was just mortified, "You're gonna have the farm burn down. How can you let a blind boy burn papers?" Well, the farm didn't burn down, I didn't burn down, the crops didn't burn down; we were all happy and alive. So, that didn't happen. I learned to ride a bike at a young age, and I had training wheels. Again, here's the ambivalence of dealing with blindness was there was no Area Education Agency; there were no Itinerant Teachers. I went to the school for the blind. I'll get to that in a few minutes here. But, my folks didn't know how to handle a blind person. They played it by the seat of the pants. And my brother, older brother, got on the top of a hill, took the training wheels off and said, "Okay ride down the hill and turn the corner." And, my mother was horrified, "Luke, he'll hurt himself!" "He's a big boy, Mom; let him alone. Either he'll learn to ride or he'll skin up his knees enough times where he'll learn to ride; one of the two." Well, it didn't take long and I was riding my bike. Once I knew how to ride a bike...and by the way, my knees are still alive and well. They weren't skinned too bad. They were skinned later on, and again here, the bike got me in more trouble than it was worth probably. But, my mom said to me, "You can ride your bike anywhere you want to; stay off the blacktop roads." We lived two miles north of the nearest blacktop road and then you go north from my place, probably five miles to the next blacktop road, and you could go, probably, four miles east to the next blacktop road and, probably again, five miles west.

So, I had probably a 15 to 20 square mile area I could ride that bike; and I did, I was all over the place.

They were never worried about me, you know. Come home for lunch. I had a Braille watch; I knew what time it was and I rode a lot of bike a lot of miles out on the farm. One night, after supper, we decided to have races; my two sisters and my brother and I had a bike race. I was ahead and we had a light pole with grass around...I could see the tan color of the gravel, the green of the grass around the light pole. I got the lead on the inside track and I was running around that light pole. I was gone east and then I turned do a counter-clockwise turn and head back west around the light pole. I was headed back south-west; I turned to go to the west and turned a little bit too short, fell on my knee, and that's when I skinned my knee up. I'd been riding bikes for years before I did that, and it was a big open gash. And, it healed and we're still walking around today. (Laughter) Hadn't had to have knee surgery; we all survive. When I was a young kid on the farm, my mom says that she learned that whatever my siblings did, I would do as well.

There were five in our family; three of them are older than I am and I have one younger sister. We had a rule that we kind of all stayed together. Well, I've always loved flowers and when I was four-years-old we were playing in the ditch, and we had an open septic tank in the ditch and I didn't even know that at the time. I was too young to realize that. So, there was some roses growing in the ditch, and my brother told me to roll a certain way. I rolled the wrong way and rolled into the sewer. They thought I was having a good time laughing, and I was really crying, but they were kind of too far away and couldn't quite make out the sound. At first, they discovered that my back from about the middle of my

waist up in the back was just full of sewer and they got me to the house and Mother was just infuriated and she kept dunking me in the sink. I thought she was going to drown me, and she kept saying to the kids, "How'd you get him into this crap anyway?" So, it was one of those things; she knew we run together. The rule was, okay, you guys can play wherever you want, but you're not leaving the yard. It was a great big yard with a great big fence around it, stay inside that fence. That didn't last too long, though. Mom was pretty forgiving, and she told me to stay out of that ditch and I was kind of afraid of the ditch for many, many years. So, I wouldn't go down there for a long long time. I was probably maybe junior high before I had the nerve to walk down to that ditch and see what was really there. So, that kind of cured me of that.

I also had some farm jobs. I could have done a lot more on the farm, but my parents didn't know how to teach me; what to teach me, and so forth. One of my jobs was to pick up the eggs. We used to call it "hunt the eggs." We would go to the nests and pick up the eggs from the nests. I had a bucket that I used to gather eggs. 11:30 and 4:30 every day we picked up eggs, and that was my job. And, I'd feed the hens and water the old hens. Another one of my jobs was 6:45 in the morning, to go out and feed the sows eared corn out of a wagon my dad had backed up against the pig pen. So, I'd crawl up in the wagon and take a big feed scoop, and I forget how many scoops of corn the sows got, and they'd fight over it and squeal and it was a great time. And, my dad said, "I want you to go out and feed the sows and then I want you to come in and hear John Colb's weather on WOI and at 7 o'clock, when I come in from milking the cows, I want to have a weather report." So, at noon my job was to

hear WHO. And, what I did at 6:30 was I heard Chet Randolph on WHO, and then I went out and fed the sows and then came in and heard John Colb and gave Dad two weather reports. At noon, we had Herb Plambeck on WHO. We had WNAX and Bob Hill with five-state weather. We had WIBW in Topeka, Kansas with their weather. And, when Dad came in about 12:15, 12:30 from the field, he had weather reports from all over the place; even when it was weather out west, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. That was his primary interest, because the weather all came from the west in Kossuth County in Northern Iowa. That taught me a lot about the weather. One day, he came in and I said, "Dad I can't give you the weather today; I don't understand it." He said, "What don't you understand?" I said, "Well, WIBW in Topeka was talking about thunderstorms being most numerous and intense in the east, what does that mean?" Well, of course he explained numerous was a lot of them, and intense was heavy in the east. Western Kansas was pretty dry, and my dad had an eighth grade education. He was not book smart but he was very, very farm smart. We call it street smart today, but we called it farm smart back then because there weren't many streets in Southern Kossuth County. So things like...I probably could have milked cows. I could have done a lot more on the farm; could have probably stacked hay in the hay mound. Things I look back at now that are not really far a field for a blind person to do, but they didn't know any better; they just didn't know.

Now at school, I went to the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School from kindergarten through my senior year. I started in the fall of '55 and graduated in 1968. And, looking back at the school I'm going to say a couple things about it;

the good and the bad, and I don't mean bad to mean ugly but probably the down-side. The up-side of the school was their academic education. You had all your books in Braille. We had some great teachers there, and if you wanted to learn you could. The problem was, we were in ways like a one-room school. You had eight, ten, twelve students in a class. Some were brighter than I was; some weren't so bright, and so you had to read stuff two and three times sometimes so all the students would finally get the material. And, it held some of us back and pushed some of us forward. That was the down-side of the academics, but we were challenged in a variety of areas. I think about literature and math, especially science. I had Chemistry, I had physics, I had Biology, and I had some teachers who really liked to push and so, they were good.

The social part, the good part of that was I had made some fast friends at Iowa Braille that are still friends of mine today. We're still fast friends after all these many, many years. The down-side of it, is you're kind of in a closed world because the campus is set on the west edge of Vinton. Vinton's a small town, and there's just not a whole lot there as far as experience you're going to gain. If you have a car and can drive to Cedar Rapids or Waterloo or Des Moines, you're fine. But, we didn't drive cars then, and don't drive cars today, so the social experience was a little bit limited; and I will get to that when I get to college.

When I got through high school, I went through the Orientation Center at the Department, called the Commission back in those days, and I really got, I think, a little bit different view of blindness here. For one thing, the environment was so different. Now, we'd go to Cedar Rapids and have travel lessons, and I didn't use my cane much at

Vinton, but in Cedar Rapids we had travel lessons with one of the teachers and I used my cane there. I did not wear sleep shades...here I wore sleep shades. I could see very little, but I could still see a little bit and therefore the sleep shades helped me to become a competent person being a totally blind person, because, after all, I was going to travel at night when I was going to go to college. And, we didn't know then, but I was going to become a totally blind person, so I was going to travel with sleep shades in a figurative sense, now, for the last twenty some years because I can't see anyway. So, I was glad I wore sleep shades. And, what I think the sleep shades do is, they give you the confidence. And people say, "Well, but why do you want to be blind?" Well, nobody wants to be blind in a literal or figurative sense, but it does teach you and give you the confidence because there are situations, I don't care if you are here or you are already legally blind, and you're going to have situations where you're not going to see even what you see now. For example, maybe in a darkened restaurant, and that was the example for me. I could see if it was bright outside, the sun shining and so forth, but I was inside in a dimly lit restaurant, you know, I was functionally totally blind even though I had some limited vision. I could see there were, maybe, dim lights, and so forth, but I couldn't see anybody or any tables or anything. So, I've always been a strong supporter of wearing sleep shades for our Center students.

15:00

Erpelding: And, when I taught, home taught, I would use shades for teaching my travel students for the same reason. You're going to have to get out there in the world. You're

going to have situations where you're going to be, functionally, a totally blind person and therefore use those. Now, I was here for three months and then went on to UNI and college, and I want to talk about social things there.

I went there in July to register and to get oriented. They had eight orientation sessions and I was in session seven. By that time, a lot of the classes were already taken, so I didn't have a lot of choice. I was a freshman coming in, in the fall; didn't know what I wanted, so I took a lot of requirements in that first semester because I was late and that was just the luck of the draw, nothing else; I was seven out of eight. I was in Psychology at 8 o'clock. We had Weight Lifting at 9 o'clock. At 10 o'clock, I had Writing. At 11 o'clock, I had Introduction to Business, and at noon I had Humanities, so bing, bing, bing, bing, bing. And, I didn't go to class every day because, for example, Psychology met three times a week, Weight Lifting twice a week, but on Mondays I had five classes in a row and Wednesdays, too. Fridays I had Weight Lifting. So, Composition we had at 10 o'clock, not writing, but same type of thing; they called it Composition at UNI. I'd go from the east end of the campus at eight, Weight Lifting at nine, east end at ten, and I tell you what, I learned how to power walk pretty quickly between those two buildings. Now, the advantage was, I had an instructor at Iowa Braille who lived in Cedar Falls, Mr. Grupp. He was the band instructor. He went to UNI, and so he helped me through a lot of my orientation and he knew where all the classes were. He walked me through from Psychology and Weight Lifting back to Composition, and so on, and so forth, so I had a basic idea where I was going and I was so very, very pleased because a lot of the students, their very first day of class, didn't have a clue as to where

they were going to go to their classes. Where's Seerley Hall? Where's Sabin Hall? Where's the auditorium? Where's Baker Hall? Where's the library? Where is the men's gym? I knew all those things, and so I had a head's-up and a lot of the kids would stop me and ask me, "Where are you going?" "Where's your next class?" "I'm going to go to Seerley Hall, Psychology, first class in the morning." "Well, I'm going to Seerley Hall too; I'll follow you." So, they did.

Now, when I came home from that Orientation Center or orientation classes at UNI, I was still at the Center, and I was just off for a couple of weeks in July; we had a break then. And, I came home and said to my mom, "I'm not going to go to college; I'm done with it." "But, you haven't started." "But, I'm done." I said, "Number one, Mom, they told us that three out of four of us wouldn't graduate, and half of us wouldn't make it in the first year." "Now, I'm a small kid from a small town in a small school, we had eight in our class. Do you really think I belong in college? Is this realistic for me? UNI has ten thousand students. There are four thousand freshmen from a class of eight, who is kidding who here?" And, my mother was down washing clothes and she said, "Here's how it is kid." She still calls me the kid. "Here's how it is kid, you went over there, you took Mr. Grupp's time, you took your father's time to pick you up, you took my time to talk to you this morning, and you've taken the Commission's time and they have worked with you; Mr. Glaza has authorized you to go to college in the fall; you're stuck. You're going!" "Mom, you can't make me." "Watch me!" She said, "You're going to go to college in the fall and you're going to succeed and you're going to be okay," and you know on and on and on. So, okay I'll give it a try; what

the heck. Yeah, the Commission said I'm probably college material, and so forth. I'll give it a whirl.

It was a strange new world for me in college. It took me a week to realize why half of the kids wouldn't make it, because a lot of them hadn't gone to class. Some had already gone home; they were homesick. Some didn't have a clue what they were doing in class; some didn't study. I thought, you know, if I go to class and I study and don't cut any classes, and so forth, then I'm going to be okay, I think. One thing I needed to do is find readers. And, I had Psychology, you know, and Humanities and I had all these books, these stacks and stacks of books. When I was at the orientation session in July, I went to the book store and got my books, and the library here had made a lot of them on reel to reel tapes for me. One of them was already in Braille, so that was already done. So, I had a lot of books there in alternative media, but I knew right away that I would have a lot of research to do in the library and I needed readers right now. John Taylor, who was Field Operations Director back in those days, sat me in his office one day before I left the Orientation Center and said, "Roger, I'm going to tell you about readers." And, he gave me all the rules of the road. You don't date your readers, and you give them a certain schedule you'll be on, so on, and so forth. "Okay, Mr. Taylor, whatever you say; okay we'll see." And, John's advice was absolutely stellar, right on the mark. I followed John's advice, and I had five readers within the first week, and a lot of those readers stuck with me unless the schedule didn't fit, and so forth. But, I would walk around...the first day I had those five classes I ate lunch at 1 o'clock, barely, and I sat down with a group of people I didn't know from a sack of flour and said, "Who wants to read to me? I need readers." I

started asking around, and once I found one reader, “Can my roommate read too?” I said, “Well, bring her over here and we’ll test her out. I got so much material here to read and we’ll see if she knows how to read, and so forth, what I want to have done.” And so, that led to another reader, let to another reader, “Down the hall, Jill wants to read; can she read?” So, I had four readers in a couple days and five by the end of the first week; it kind of snowballed. I used to call financial aid office and get readers, and boy, they sent me some cracker-jack candidates. So, I had to turn a few of them down, they sent me so many of them. So, I was a happy man. I had readers, I had books, I had a couple college roommates; I knew the way to classes and I sure wasn’t going to flunk out because I wasn’t going to be one of those four that wasn’t going to make it, but I was a little more confident. I thought okay, study, read, and class, and have a good time. The good times came later.

I’ll never forget, my freshman year, there were three things that occurred to me right away that will always stick in my mind. The first thing was we had a hall director named Gary Schwartz and Gary was a nice guy, but Gary, the poor guy, didn’t know squat about blindness and I couldn’t teach him; I couldn’t get to him. The first thing that occurred was we had an old dormitory. We used to call it the ghetto, Baker Hall. And, we had old trash shoots. It was a three-story building, a long, narrow three-story building. You throw the trash down these shoots. I was at the east end on first floor, about five doors to the west on the north side of the hallway. We were going to have fires in the building, and I loved to burn the papers on the farm, but I wasn’t about to burn any papers in the dormitory. I don’t like getting up in the middle of the night and going out for

fire drill. And so, Gary called me into his office and said, "Roger, I know you know about these fires." "Gary, I really don't. No, I wouldn't put life or limb in danger; if I knew I'd come tell you. I might be scared, but this is serious. I know this is a fire trap, and so forth, and those old wooden floors and stuff; I would come tell you, I really would. Gary, please believe me." "Well, you know, the fire Marshall's coming up here to investigate this, and you're going to testify." "Gary, no I don't know anything; I really don't." He said, "Well I think you do." I said, "What makes you think that I know; tell me." He said, "Well, you're blind and blind people have a sixth sense." I said, "You got to be kidding me; you're joking." "No, I'm not joking at all." "You're subpoenaed; you better be there Wednesday at 2 o'clock over in the Administration Building." "But Gary, I got a class." "Too bad; you will be there or we'll come get ya; take your pick." So, I did come to the Marshall's hearing and I said, "Sir, I'm sorry I'm here; I don't know anything. I really, really don't know anything." And, he thought I was too dumb to know anything because I was blind. Anyway, so he said to me, "Why are you here then? Here you got a subpoena and the whole ball of wax." And I said, "Because Gary sent me." "Why would Gary send you?" "Because, blind people have a sixth sense." "Get out of here," he said. He was halfway mad at me. "I said, aw thanks; I really don't know anything; I don't. I'd tell you if I did." (Laughter)

Well, poor Gary...It wasn't long after that it was winter time and we were bored and about midnight on a Friday night, somebody brought a couple of bags of marshmallows. I don't know where they got them, and we had a marshmallow fight out in the hall. And, poor Gary comes down the hall and yells, "Stop this violence!" Well, what was

violent about a marshmallow fight? And see, I was expected to be there and to be a part of the crowd. I was throwing as many marshmallows as the next person was. We had a guy who was a great big guy; his name was Ken. We had nicknames for everybody. We had Hauss, and I was Erp, and, you know, everybody had nicknames. Roger Fox was Foxy, and we had another guy named Keith Poling, the name for him was Wild, and so we all had nicknames. One day, they called for Kenneth Clarke. One of his girlfriend...we had a house phone out in the hallway. I said, "I don't know a Kenneth Clarke; I'll try to find him." So, I started going up and down the hall, "Kenneth Clarke, Kenneth Clarke; is there a Kenneth Clarke here?" And, pretty soon Hauss said, "That's me." And I said, "Oh, Gosh if they asked for Hauss I would have known." We had this guy that liked to take a flying leap at his bed, and so we put bananas in his bed; ripe, mushy bananas. He took the flying leap and boy oh boy, you know, but we did a lot of practical joking; we had a good time. And, as a result of this practical joking, or this violence as Gary used to call it, I got called into Gary's office again the second time and Foxy said...I said, "Foxy, I'm not going to go." "He is full of bologna; I'm not going to go." "Erp, this is serious. This letter is serious; this is not a joke; you got to go to his office." I said, "Foxy, I just can't; this is crazy I haven't done anything than I did last time." So, he said, "Erp, I'll go with you." So, we walked down to his office. "Hi Gary; how can I help?" "Well I hear the boys are picking on you." And Foxy says, "You bet you we pick on him, and we're going to keep picking on him, because he picks on us, too. We're going to get him. We're going to get this blind guy!" And so, I just kind of smiled and sat there. But, Gary was serious and we were, too. I was going to get

them. It was winter time we were all buddies and so we sat and talked and pretty soon Gary realized it wasn't me. There was another blind man who lived a floor below us that was being picked on, and was having a terrible time. They would hide his magnifier and they would hide his books. Well they'd hide my things, too, but they paid for it. I didn't get mad; I got even. And so, they quit hiding my stuff after a while. They knew if I couldn't find...I'd just start going down the hall randomly and get into people's rooms and start throwing things to the floor, and so forth. And, they all pretty much knew leave that Rog alone, he gets even. But, the other fellow did not deal with blindness well, and they did pick on him and he was a mess. So, I went down and talked to him and kind of counseled with him a little bit and said, "You got to get after these guys; can't let them walk all over you like a rug. I get after the guys upstairs, and it's kind of catch-us-catch-can. This is a college dormitory and we're having a good time." So, those are the three things about my college. I was picked on, and I picked on people, too, and I had a sixth sense, and I was a violent guy for throwing marshmallows. But, again, that's just par for the course. The first semester was probably the hardest.

And, dating women was a hard thing, too, because I had never...and Vinton was a closed society and did I date blind women at Vinton? Yes, but going out and seeking out people to date was a new experience for me. And so, the first spring I was there we had a button dance; and you could buy a button for a nickel and go to this dance and get in for free. So, I did and I had a couple of my readers at that dance, too, and I said, "I'm looking for somebody to dance with, can you help me out?" And so, they would say "Okay, walk right across the room, there's a young lady there just

sitting there by herself; go up and ask her to dance.” So, I’d walk over there; I’d hear people getting up and walking away, and it was then that I realized that we live in a different world as blind guys. I remember going out of that dance, waving my cane around yeah, I’m blind power. That was the age of the black power, and so forth, and I was blind power. And so, I was pretty angry about the whole thing, despite all my buddies, and so forth. I didn’t want to dance with my friends; I wanted to dance with the sweeties. But, you know, you get over that and you learn to adjust to it and you say okay, you can be mad and angry and live your life that way or you can go out and keep on trying.

About a week later, a gal called me. She wanted to do a paper about blindness, and so I went over to the student union to talk to her and I said, “Patti, I’ll be happy to talk to you about blindness and show you how to use the cane and show you the Braille system, and so forth,” but I said, “You have to go out with me before I’ll do this for you.” And fortunately, she was not committed to anybody, she was not dating anybody, so she said, “Okay, it’s a deal.” We dated quite a bit that spring, and so you learn to deal with these things in college. It was a great proving ground for me. I loved college, but after four years I was ready to roll out of there and move on. I was done with it. I could have gone to graduate school and I was already accepted and I just said, “You know, after four years I’m out of here.” I did graduate; I made the Dean’s list and did very well, but I studied and I went with the class and I had read; I wrote papers and so forth, and I also had a dog on good time!

30:00

Clarke: And, your mom told you so.

Erpelding: Well, my mom...that was interesting about my mother, because when I was in high school my mom, dad and I had a fight. And, my dad said to me, before I went to Vinton that fall, "Don't you come home again 'till you've changed." And so, eight weeks went by I never wrote, I never called, I wouldn't acknowledge Mom's letters; when the phone rang I would hide, because I thought it might be her and sometimes it was. And, she came to pick me up one Friday and said, "Are you going to come home with me?" And I said, "Mom, I haven't changed." But, my mother, we've always been very, very close. "You're coming home." She took me by the hand and led me out of the room, and I followed her like a little lamb. So, I was in college and one time, Mom said to me, "You know, are you mad at us?" "No Mom, why do you ask?" "You never come home anymore." And I said, "Oh, Mom, I'm sorry, I really done you wrong because I don't come home; I'm too busy. I'm just too dog on busy not only with my studies, but with all my buddies and my girlfriends, and so forth." "Oh, then I'm happy. If you're happy, I'm happy." (Laughter) "Yeah, I am happy. I'm having a great time in college; my grades are good. I'll show you my grades. I'm getting all A's and B's; I'm having a dog on good time, too." So, I said, "That's why I'm not coming home. Maybe I should come home a little more often, because I'm not mad at you guys at all." "No, you stay at college and have a good time. We'll be okay here." Because my folks realized that, hey, they wanted me to be independent. They raised me with that goal in mind and they were happy that I was happy and independent.

I was going to be a teacher and I had a couple good job interviews, and I came in second place and Jim Glaza called me and said, “Well, you came in second. I’m sorry that it doesn’t buy you any bread and butter.” I said, “Jim, don’t be sorry; I’m happy I’m competitive. If I can come in second place I can come in first place and get a job, because, I’m happy I can come in second place, so that gives me a lot of confidence.” Well, that was the closest I ever came to getting a job in teaching. But John Taylor, again, called me up and said, “Roger, you know, school’s out and you don’t have a job and we’re going to have a cafeteria opening pretty soon down here, how about taking some BEP training?” And I said, “You know, I’m not doing anything else, so why not.”

So, I came down here and I trained at various sites we had then, the Federal Building cafeteria, the Lucas Building cafeteria, the Polk County Court House, the Iowa DOT in Ames with different managers. And, in February of '73 I moved to Perry, and in March of that year the Oscar Meyer Cafeteria opened. I was ill prepared. I was 23-years-old and I had the skills, but not the life experience. It was a packing house; the men there were pretty rough and tumble and pretty street wise. I was pretty naive. They had a very strong union there, before, and the employees unionized. Looking back at it, it was a great experience; it taught me probably a lot about life, but I was pretty unhappy and so, I only lasted a year and a half up there and I said, “You know, there’s more to life than this.”

My next foray was in telemarketing, believe it or not. New Sash of Iowa down here in Des Moines had an opening for a telemarketer in a boiler room doing telephone calls for windows. We made appointments for the salesmen to come

out and show their windows. I thought, well how easy can that be? And, Harry Wirtz was the guy that hired me. Harry said, "You have to make one per hour, successful call per hour." I thought, oh man. You know, I had this little spiel here in Braille that I got to use. I'd hired a reader to read some phone books to me. This is a piece of cake. There were days when I had no successes in eight hours and twice Harry called me and said, "If you don't start making the quota, we're going to fire you." And I said, "Harry, you told me what the quota was; if I can't make it I know where the door is; just tell me to leave and there will be no hard feelings." And then, I'd come back and make quota again for a while. And, it was winter time and people weren't much caring about windows. When the spring came, then I was making maybe 16...and all we did is make appointments for the sales people to go out and show. I was having 16 successes a lot of days in the spring. It was still tough, but I figured if I stuck around long enough I'd either get fired or succeed, one of the two. And, I think as blind guys and blind people, we have to expect the same as everybody else. When I was there...I was there for four months and Thelma and I were the only people staying there for four months; everybody else had come and gone. It was that big of a turnover in that telephone room, but I knew that one or the other, if I could meet the standards that would be fine; if I couldn't meet the standards then there was a door on the west side of the building and there was a parking lot the west of the door and I could go out there and get a ride home and be done with it. I never asked for anything special from Harry or the crew up there. Let me get a chance to meet standards. If I do, wonderful! And, I did toward the end.

In April of that year, Dr. Jernigan called me and said, “How would you like to be a Home Teacher?” We called ourselves Home Teachers. Now, they’re Rehabilitation Teachers but...I said, “Well, gee what a deal! When can I start?” He gave me a start date. And I said, but I got to give the people at New Sash some notice. I really think they deserve...“Oh, yeah I wouldn’t expect nothing less of you but to give them proper notice.” So, that was all done. Thelma was so mad, “Okay, you’re going to be here for a couple more weeks; now you’re going to outdo me, because you don’t care anymore; you’re out of here.” And, sure enough, I was, I mean man oh man, I was making appointments galore for these salesmen. I was keeping them really busy. And, I began here on May 5th, 1975. And, I had took New Staff Seminar with Jim Omvig, and went out with different people, Dick Davis and Dave Quick and Denzel Tompkins. Gosh, I think that was it, three different field trips with the staff. So, in July of ’75 I was on my own; 22 counties in Western Iowa teaching Braille and cane travel and typing and sewing and Home Ec. and a lot of talk about attitudes and counseling, and so forth. I loved Home Teaching; I just absolutely loved it. That was the cat’s meow. I was so happy, and I met my future bride in July that year, so life was a piece of cake. Then, I knew they were talking about opening up a Sioux City office. So, in January of ’77 Dr. Jernigan called me. Dr. Jernigan said to me, “Okay, we have an opening in Sioux City; how about being a Voc. Rehab Counselor; a step up for you, and so forth?” I said, “Why not. Heck, I’ve been renting here in Des Moines, renting a little apartment. I’ll move to Sioux City, Dr. Jernigan, and I’ll go up there and knock them dead.” So, I got married in June, moved in July, and we opened a Sioux City office. And, I had

twelve counties there I covered in North West Iowa Voc. Rehab Counseling. That's what I was doing when Mary came up to see me in '84.

Clarke: Right.

Erpelding: But, some of my most memorable things about Home Teaching were, and I still call it Home Teaching, but that's not what it is anymore. John Taylor was my boss; he was Director of Field Operations still, and he was my boss then, one of my bosses anyway, and Joe Balderston was one of my bosses and, of course, Dr. Jernigan; and it was a wonderful time to be here in Des Moines. I really enjoyed it. Now, I had a lot of folks who would kind of frustrate me. They could learn Braille and just wouldn't do it. They had all kinds of excuses, "Oh, I've been busy," or, "Oh I'm just not motivated," and whatever the case might be, and it drove me crazy. I had one guy, Harlin Leonard, he was a teacher and I'd see him late in the afternoon after school, and he wanted to learn to read Braille; he and his wife, wonderful people. He was a good learner and so forth, good student. But, one day he was so frustrated, he threw his book down and walked out of the room in a huff, and so I said, "I'll come back in a couple weeks; don't worry about it." "You're never coming back here again; I'm done with that damn Braille." And so I said, "Think about it some." And so I went out to the car and met my driver, and his wife followed me and says, "You'll be back in two weeks won't you?" I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll be back in two weeks. Let him cool off; let him alone; don't give him any heck about it. This is how you learn; you hit a wall sometimes. Your husband is bright and

he's future oriented, and he knows he'll come back and he'll do it; don't worry about it." And, of course, he did.

I had a woman down in Paige County, and I'll never forget her, Dorothy, and she wanted to learn to read Braille. And, she was Diabetic and she had Neuropathy, horrible Neuropathy in her hands, and just couldn't feel the dots. And, Mabel Nading was upstairs teaching Braille, and Mabel taught me Braille at the Orientation Center, of course. We had advanced Braille; I knew Braille all my life, so I had learned some Braille shorthand from Mabel, and so forth, and away we went. I said to Mabel, "I have this student she wants to learn Braille in the worst possible way, and I can't figure it out. She is Diabetic, and she has Neuropathy in her hands, and so forth." So Mabel said, "Well, now I have these other kinds of Braille books here, maybe you can look at for her." "Now Mabel, I don't believe in that pre-readiness Braille crap; you know that." "I know you don't, but you got to deal with people where they're at." So I said, "Okay, I understand." "If you can get her to identify these squares and these circles, and so forth; that's insulting to you, I know, but to her, if she can figure this out, she'll be happy moving on to the next step." So, I tried those and she couldn't tackle them. Went back to Mabel and we used large dot, all kinds of things, and it just wasn't happening. So, finally...I knew I was going to be moving on to Sioux City pretty soon and I said, "Dorothy, I'm sorry, but I give up," and she just cried. I was just upset, because here are all these people who could learn to read Braille and wouldn't, and she would give her hands to read Braille; just had no feeling. So, we left there; packed up all the books and left; I was very, very sad.

Clarke: I can tell.

Erpelding: Headed up to Council Bluffs to catch a bus, and I didn't say five words in that 60-mile trip to my driver, whom I'd known for a long time. So, I thought, okay, maybe it's time to go to a new career. I love Home Teaching, but after today, I'm just not sure anymore.

Rehab Counseling was a real challenge. And, I had some people who were dying to go to work and couldn't find work, and those kind of folks were a real challenge to me. I had a guy up in Hawarden, Iowa and he wanted to go to work in the worst possible way. He wanted to be a machinist, and I had a driver who was a retired machinist. He was disabled; he retired and so, we went to Sheldon. They had a vocational school there; still do. It's more of a community college now. They had a special course called Skills Training Improvement Program, or STIP. And, they were convinced that Lawrence couldn't do it. He was blind, after all, and couldn't be a machinist, and I was convinced that he could. "Well, you know, you don't understand, you're blind, and so forth." "Well, you don't understand, because you don't know the techniques that Lawrence has." And so, we went back and forth, and back and forth. And so, my driver, at the end, finally said, "Can I say a few words?" He said, "I'm just a dumb driver here, but I'm ashamed of you guys... and won't give Lawrence a chance." He said, "I can tell you what," he said, "I'm a machinist, and I'm a sighted guy, but I've driven for Roger, now, for about two years and I've known Lawrence for about the same amount of time, and I want to tell you something. You tell me what he can't do, and I'll show you how he can." And so, they got real, real quiet. "Well, yeah, maybe; maybe we'll think about it and..."

So, they took him in and, of course, he did magnificently. Lawrence had been through the Center, and he'd been through the shop and he knew alternative techniques. Plus, he was just a dog gone, smart, motivated guy. He made it through and got a job.

The first day we got up at about 5 o'clock. My driver picked me up and picked him up and took him to work because we wanted to make sure it went well. I was paranoid anyway. I had a horrible, horrible cold and it was a cloudy, rainy May day, and we went up there. And so, we got to the plant about 6, 6:30, and his shift started at 7 o'clock. Some of the other folks came in and, you know, "How you going to do these certain jobs?" They just wanted to know; they didn't know. And so, Lawrence had a tool box there and he said, "Well I got some things here, a couple Rotomatics and some Micrometers, and so forth." Well, he opened up that tool box and the tools went all over the room. He didn't have it locked and so, we were picking up tools off the floor and everything else. It was not a very auspicious start and I didn't feel well, but we got everything going and he was there for probably...oh, not too long. They laid off about half of the plant; again, first in first out when you're in layoff order, so he got laid off as well; but, again, not because he was blind, because his number was up. He hadn't been there long enough to build up seniority, and that's okay. We weren't happy about it, but they didn't discriminate against him. They just said, "Okay, we're laying off half the plant, and you're one of the half we're laying off."

45:00

Erpelding: People like that I remember very, very well; people that really, really wanted to work and who got jobs. And then, there were those who could work who wouldn't, and that drove me nuts. There were those who wanted to work and had a lot of other disabilities, and so forth, and had a tough road to hoe and we would work and work and work, and some we found work and some we didn't. So, it was a real challenge, one that I enjoyed sometimes and sometimes I just shook my head and said boy what in the world, you know.

Lived in Sioux City; bought my first house, of course. I mentioned I got married in June and moved in July. Jack was born in Sioux City, my 24-year-old, in fact he's 24-years-old today, as a matter of fact. So, in many ways it was good. I joined the Garden Club; became the president of the Garden Club.

Clarke: Tell me a little bit about that, the Garden Club. What is that?

Erpelding: Well the Garden Club, Mary...I got involved when I bought my home in '77. When I'd ride the Morningside bus down to work, there were people on the bus who were in the Garden Club and I would say to them, "When do you guys meet?" Anybody could walk in the door and pay your dues; that's all they care about. Anybody can join the Garden Club, and so I did. And, the first few years I just kind of hung around and learned the lay of the land, and so forth, and they said, "Do you want to be president?" And I said, "Yeah I'll be president; why not." So, I was president two years and when my two-year term was up one of the gals called me up, "We're not going to nominate for president next year."

“That’s fine.” “Well, are you hurt?” And I said, “No, that’s okay.” We had a large Garden Club probably about 30, 40 members. I said, “Somebody else can serve.” We had kind of this rule about two-year terms and I said, “That’s cool.” “I’m still going to come to the meetings; I’m not mad; it’s okay, that’s fine.” And, one of the things that I did in Garden Club that I really thought was cool, our Garden Club was asked to judge the Plymouth County Fair Produce. And so, since I was president they said, “Well, why don’t you go up and judge the fair.” Who has ever heard of a blind guy judging at a county fair! I thought why not, what the heck, no problem.

So, I had Teresa with me, and she was sighted, and I said, “Now when there’s color involved I’ll have you tell me about the uniformity of the color, and so forth.” We had all the judging criteria and it was pretty easy to do and there were two things about that fair I remember so very, very well. The first thing is, somebody brought some carrots and they were the most beautiful, perfect tapered carrots I have ever, ever seen. When you’re judged at the fair, you have the roots on them; you have the tops on them; you just clean them; you just wash them. Oh, they were beautiful carrots. I rated those best of the show. And I said, “Now who raised those carrots?” And, somebody came up to me, a kid from Akron, Iowa. I said, “Yeah, I should have known, because at Akron Iowa it’s Sioux River sand. And so, oh, they were just perfect carrots, long and tapered and...I’m hungry thinking about them today; take the tops off, peel them and eat them. They were beautiful, just beautiful, and my wife said they were uniform as far as color, and so forth. They looked as good as they felt; they were wonderful carrots. Well they had plates and plates and plates of tomatoes and a lot of

them were real uniform; they had, I think, four or five on a plate; I've forgotten how many. And so, I said to Teresa, "Now, these are really the most uniform in size and shape and firmness, and so forth. So, pick out the colors that are most uniform for me." They told me when I was going to judge this fair, "You'll be by yourself." "We'll be there with you, and so forth." "You'll be pretty much by yourself." Well, that was not true. As I began to judge things, there were more and more people there and people would ask, "Why did you pick that plate of tomatoes?" "Why did you pick those carrots?" "Why did you pick those cucumbers?" And so forth. And I would say, "Now the judging criteria are..." And I would say, "Okay now this is why the criteria..." "This is why this cucumber is the best here." It will get the cucumber division or the pepper division. One guy was not happy about his tomatoes and I said to Teresa, "I think I know this guy's tomatoes." I said, "Are these your tomatoes here?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "How dare you criticize in front of a whole group full of people when these are wormy." I said, "Look at this!" And so it got real, real quiet. Here they were wormy. I was shown the tomatoes and I just put them to the side, because I thought okay these are wormy so they don't get anything; they don't get considered. It was a lot of fun, to me. I made it fun and the guy was offended, but I wasn't. And I thought, you know, I've got all the cards here and it was absolutely wonderful.

I was also in Lions Club. We met right down the street from where I worked downtown in Sioux City, and I was the Vice President. I would have been President, except Craig Slayton called me one day to come down to Orientation alumni and he said, "Have you ever thought about being the Director of Business Enterprises Program?" I said, "Craig, I

think you're absolutely nuts. I ran a BEP place, and I think I had enough of that when I was here," and so forth. But I said, "You know it's been about eleven years, and I'm probably ready for a career change, and the more I think about it, the more it has an appeal to me. I think if you offered it to me, I think I'll take it." So he said, "We need to have the interviews, and so forth." And I said, "That's fine; you tell me when you want me down there for an interview, and I'll come in and interview." And, I did that and so, in March of '88 I moved down here. We sold our house up there and bought a house down here, and brought little Jack with us; and so, I became Director of Business Enterprises Program.

I soon realized that I'd made the right decision. I loved this new job. It was challenging in a different way than the Voc. Rehab Counselor, because this is an employment program, a self employment program, but it was also a very competitive program. You can look at Randolph-Sheppard as a sheltered work environment, and it can be if you let it or as a competitive opportunity. And I saw, when I came down here, a lot of really kind of blind people who were...I think probably didn't expect much of themselves, and of their businesses. And Travis, who was my predecessor, is a friend of mine and I would go to see Travis and I'd say, "Travis I need a history lesson. Why is this person doing these kind of things?" And, you know, Travis would talk about it, and so forth, with me and he was a fantastic mentor to me. He's a great man, and I'm forever grateful to Travis because I wanted to raise expectations, to raise the standards; and so did he, by the way. And, you know, "How did you do it? Why didn't this succeed? Why did you fail? Why didn't this work? Why did that work? And so on, and so

on, and so forth. He had a history from here to the Missouri border. He knew a lot about the history of the program and the operators, and so forth. He was fantastic to me; he really was.

One of the things that occurred when I first got here, I wanted to go around and see all the vendors. Travis took me to a lot of them before I started here, and Sylvester Nemmers was...we have a committee of blind vendors, selected by its peers, and Vest was the committee chairman. I had known Vest, I trained with Vest back in the Federal building back in '72, when I was in BEP training. So, I knew Sylvester, or Vest, we called him for years and years and years. He was going to retire from the committee of blind vendors, and Steve Barber was the next chair for a couple of years, and then Joe Van Lent had his 18 years as committee chair. So, I'm going around to all the vendors and after Travis and I...he gave me the grand tour and so, then I went around to all the vendors individually and said, "What do you expect? What do you want? What do you think? How can I help? What should I not do?" And, I got some good ideas and some bad ideas, and so on, and so forth. And, I listened and I went to Joe Van Lent; I said, "Joe, what are you thinking?" "I'm thinking road-side vending." And I said, "Joe, what in the hell is road-side vending?" So, he talked about rest area vending at our rest areas here in Iowa, and the Canelli Amendment; and this is all kind of strange to me, but...so, I listened a little. "Okay, Joe, but wait a minute. How do we get from here to there? How do we get DOT to let us into the rest areas, and so forth; they don't have to. The Canelli Amendment of the Transportation Act gives us permission, or gives us authority to, if everybody's agreeable to it. How do we get from here to

there?” So, he and I met with people from the DOT, and first it was, “Oh, gosh, it’s going to be all vandalism,” and we want this, and we want that, and it’s not going to work. Well, DOT...I learned a lot about DOT. There are no sessions; they like pilot projects. And I said...Will Zittrich was the guy in charge at that time, kind of our go to contact. I remember Will Zittrich, Don East, and Mark Masteller; all three really good fellows and they just were concerned, and I said, “Okay, let’s try a pilot project. We got about 30 vendors here, and we can find a cracker-jack vendor.” And, I think Sylvester was with us, as well as Joe Van Lent, and maybe even Steve was with us as well, from our side. With all the people we have in this program, we can find you a good blind person to run the first one. So, we agreed we’d go to Mitchellville. And we have a process for transfer and promotion; it’s called a bid process. That’s kind of a misnomer, but Randy Criswell was our first vendor we selected.

Randy had a solid track record; a great guy, great personality, great customer service, great machine mechanical ability, great all the way around. And, I thought, what an ambassador for our first road-side vending facility to have Randy Criswell run it for us. So, we had the person and, of course, then we got Randy with the DOT, and so forth...because to know Randy is to love Randy, and right away, you’re going to like Randy. We knew that and they, of course did, and so forth. We were going to go...our first one was going to be at Mitchellville, where Randy lived, and how convenient for Randy. And so, one day Will called me and said, “You can’t go to Mitchellville, we’re going to tear up the road.” And I said, “Well, by golly, when it’s done it will be in good shape anyway.” He said, “Well I’ve got a better

idea.” He said, “I won’t make you wait for us; how about going out to Waukee? We’ve just done that road.” And I said, “That’s a great idea!” Randy had to travel a little further, so we told Randy if he’d take Waukee for us when Mitchellville was built, he would get that automatically. And, we bid on Waukee and everybody was happy with that. The committee of blind vendors and us do kind of a mutual thing, called active participation. They really are involved in all of our policies and our procedures and rules, and so forth; and who gets what location and why and, so on and so forth. We are all heavily involved; we’re kind of a partnership, and I think it’s a great idea. The committee and I have always worked well together. We drew up an agreement that Randy could live with, and he was happy with it and we were happy with it.

In April of 1990, we opened up Waukee and we had one coffee machine, we had two pop machines, we had three snack machines. I’m sorry...we had three pop, one coffee and two snack. “So, how are we going to do this? I don’t want you in our bathroom building.” And I said, “Well, frankly, neither do we; I don’t see it as being spacious enough. I see it as more of a problem because we have to do all the rewiring, and so forth.” And, we all agreed we’d build a little vending building. And, those buildings are still at Waukee by the way; they’re still there. Who’s going to pay for it? Well, you know, Coca-Cola was going to pay for it, if we gave them the right to have those machines in those buildings. Well, that presented some legal problems for us, unfortunately, so we did get some money from the legislature appropriated for it, and we did build the two Waukee buildings. So, that’s when they opened up; and the Mitchellville one was opened up two years later, and Randy

was, of course, assigned to that location and we bid out Waukee as scheduled. Now, we have 35 rest area locations with the vending; we have 16 managers who are involved in that road-side process, in part or in whole, for their locations.

Clarke: Wow!

Erpelding: Another evolvement in the Randolph-Sheppard Program, the last 20 years, is the cafeteria business. The cafeterias, because of a variety of factors, became less and less profitable for the vendors and for us as an agency. Equipment costs, sanitation requirements, competition, employees being shuffled around, food costs; you name it. These cafeterias, as time went on, become less and less of an option for us in the program. So, we began closing our cafeterias and making them into vending operations. We still have two left, one is a snack bar at the Post office and the other is over at Independence. Now, when I first came here, you would have a building of people, for example, and that would make a nice cafeteria site. Now, it would not, because of the economic scale involved. I just heard, the other day, that somebody would go into a building in Arizona to run a cafeteria, but they'd have to have one-thousand-four-hundred people, or more, and that makes sense to me as an administrator.

1:00:00

Erpelding: The Post Office, in the new regulations that came out last August, said if you have nine hundred people or less on your busiest shift, you have all vending; no cafeteria, no

lunch line, no snack bar, no counter service; it's all vending. So, if you have eight-hundred people on shift one, seven-hundred on shift two and six-hundred on shift three; you have a total population of two-thousand-one-hundred, but you don't meet that nine-hundred population criteria for your busiest shift, therefore, it's all vending. To me, I just said thank you, because it's tough to make money with all the competition. Plus, people can bring stuff in themselves and that's okay, too, because that's their privilege. So, the cafeterias have become kind of a second nature thing for us, unfortunately.

The problem with that is simply this; we're going to more and more large vending routes. When you have a vending route, what do you need? A driver. How many people can drive who are blind? We used to train blind people to be employees, as well as managers, and now we don't have very many employees. For example, Kevin, here at the cafeteria or at the current vending operation here, where it used to be a cafeteria. Kevin has a large vending route, and he has one and a half employees, and they both drive. They have to. That's the down-side of our changing program. But, in the public sector, or in the private sector I should say, it's the same thing. It's like farming. You get bigger and bigger and bigger because the economy is scaled on the inputs, and so forth, to make money in farming or any business; whether it be a local restaurant or a shoe store, or whatever the case might be, it's hard to find a Mom and Pop shoe store or hardware store. My wife's, Beth, my second wife...my wife's brother, Frank, is in the hardware business in a small town in West-Central Iowa...at Dunlap, and he's lucky. He's kind of out in the middle of nowhere, as far as lumber yards or hardware stores go, so he's done very, very

well. But, the little town of Panama, where Beth grew up...her dad ran the lumber yard and hardware store; it's gone. Not because Frank is dead, but because the economy has scaled. You can go to Omaha to Menards or Denison to Spahn and Rose, or any of those places, and you can get a lot better selection at a lot better price. So, those little Mom and Pop operations are dying out. It's too bad, but the K-Marts and the Wal-Marts of the world, and the Menards and the Home Depots and the Lowe's, are really kind of ruling the roost. Pretty soon that's the only place to shop; you have no other choice but to go to those big box stores. And, I've been to all of them, too, so I know.

The third thing that has not really affected Iowa very much in Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprises Program, and it's cool, and that is it's called the teaming partner concept. We know we can run food service in large military dining operations, but we also know it takes a lot of expertise and a lot of money and a lot of staff to oversee those, and supervise those in the Business Enterprises Program; and we don't have it. So, somebody came up with the idea of having a teaming partner, whether it be Sodexo, or Cantu or, in our case, Blackstone Consulting, who knows how to run military dining. And, I'm going to say maybe, like, in May of 2005, Mr. Thompson called me from Camp Dodge. He's their contracting officer and said, "I want to talk to somebody about Randolph-Sheppard." And I said, "Talk to me; you got the man." They were going to have a hundred-and-seventy-five troops come in for three years to fix equipment from Iraq that had been damaged or just needed to be repainted, because the sand blasted it away, and so on so forth. And I said, "We'd love to serve our troops." I said, "I don't know where to start, but we have a teaming partner,

Blackstone Consulting, and Joe and I will work with you, and when do you want to get this started?" "Well, our first troops are going to come June 11th." We had one month; I didn't know squat. We had a contract with Joe already signed, just in case, because we had a Job Corps place in Denison we might be able to go into, but they were happy doing it themselves and they weren't about to change, and that was okay.

So, we had all the paperwork in place. I called Joe and I said, "Joe, I need you. We got an opportunity here. Help us out." So, Joe and his crew knew about how to...even though we had priority we still had to be competitive, and so Joe knew how to be competitive. In fact, Mr. Thompson called me one of the days, "I don't know how you guys did it. You are within one percent of my food budget." And I said, "That's why we have a teaming partner, because they know; we don't." And, the military had this book called a TB530 Sanitation book. It's a big book. It's much more complicated than the State Sanitation or the Federal Sanitation laws, much more exacting, and so on so forth. And, I had that Brailled for me from the library. We assigned a blind manager to run that, with Blackstone as a partner, and it does take a lot of work; time, staff and so forth...a lot of trials and tribulations, but it was also very, very profitable for a blind manager and it was great.

The problem is, one day Mark called me from Camp Dodge mad as a wet hen and said, "We're done." I said, "Wait no, no we'll make it right." "No, no you can't make it right. They pulled my troops on me; they're going to be gone on October 15th, they're out of here; they've been reassigned." So, three years turned into maybe four months and he was not happy, and therefore, that operation was

very short lived, but a very nice operation and I hope they were happy with us and remember us well, because it was a good ride; it really was. I learned a lot there, too. So, it's very, very doubtful we'll have a second experience at Camp Dodge like that, but a great experience.

Let's talk about gardening. How in the world did I get into gardening? And, there aren't a lot of blind people who do garden, which surprises me, because it's so simple. People think you have to use all kinds of techniques and tools and devices, and so forth. It's very, very simple. How did I start? Well, with my mother, because, again, my mom knew that wherever the kids went I'd go, too. And, on the farm you all worked. When I was in pre-school, my mom would go out in the garden and, "What do I do with blind Rog? The kids were busy and I can't stay with him in the house. He'll have to go outside with me, in the garden, love it or not, he'll go out with me in the garden," so I did. I didn't see it as punishment; I loved the garden. I don't know why to this day, but I do love it. Now, one thing I did when I was four-years-old, was I was riding a tricycle on my aunt and uncle's house here in Des Moines, and I was going down a big hill and I fell off the bike and broke my collar bone. And, I was in a neck brace and so, I couldn't go outside. And, my mother had moss roses growing in two great big tractor tires. And, of course, they come out in the morning, and they would just kind of fade away in the day time. I said, "Mom, I'll go look at the moss roses." I know they're full of flowers and they were every color of the rainbow, red and purple and yellow and orange and white, and different shades of all those colors. Well, mom said, "You can go outside and you can go to the tractor tire look at the moss roses, and then you got to come back in the house." So, I

did that every morning for a while. I had this silly neck brace on; I'd kind of squat down to the tire and look at the colors, and so forth. And, I've always been fascinated by flowers.

When I was in kindergarten at Vinton, on the west side of the cottage, there was a great big dandelion growing. And, it got a big bud and then it bloomed and then it kind of curled up and then one day it has this white seed head on it and I was scared. I thought, how can this transform into this white ball of nonsense such a pretty yellow flower. Well, of course, you take Biology later on in life and you'll learn why this transformation takes place. My mother always raised geraniums, and she had them in tin cans. She'd take them in and put them on the window sills upstairs, and so forth, on the farm and if she had one that was going to be in bloom, I'd take it back to school. And, one day in third grade it was real cold in January and the geranium froze. And so, we took it down to the classroom anyway and tore all the dead leaves off because the stem was still green; it was going to be okay. And, it got new leaves, and so forth, and about April the first we had a real windy day at Vinton, and the window came crashing down. So, I didn't know it at the time. So, after school I said to Mr. Michael our third grade teacher, "Where's my geranium?" "Remember when the window went crashing down this afternoon?" I said, "Oh, yeah." "Well, the geranium was in the way and it got crushed;" and I was crushed. I just, oh, how could that be? "You mean the can got crushed, too, and the dirt got crushed? I want to see it." "Well, no I threw it away; it was so mangled up I threw it away." And I said, "Oh boy, I don't understand how that could be." And, I was beside myself and Mr. Michael said, "Well how about reading

one of these Braille books here that I got from the library;” and I’d read them all. I didn’t want to read any of these stupid Braille books; I read them all. He said, “I bet you haven’t read this one.” I put my hand out and the geranium...and he said, “April fools!” I loved my geraniums, and I raise geraniums today. I have geraniums out in the sun room today. And, I laughed and laughed a lot; I was so happy to see my geranium again. It was a scraggly and scrawny old thing, but it was mine so quite a Braille book!

Well then, of course, when I went to school I knew geraniums from marigolds from corn. And, we had a huge, huge field garden, and one year in Vinton we had some great big pumpkins; made Jack-O-lanterns out of them...huge...and I told Dad about them and brought seeds home and Dad says, “Those are cow pumpkins.” I said, “How come they call them cow pumpkins?” “They’re only fit for the cows; we can’t eat them; they’re just big ugly.” So, the next year, “Dad, can I plant some?” “Oh, on the west edge of the garden by the fence; plant all you want.” And, they grew and they grew and they were huge, huge pumpkins. Oh, they were fun to watch grow. I had a friend of mine who came out from catechism...that will be my next story here about growing up. I’ll kind of revert back to that in a minute. And Steve said, “I’ve never seen such big monster pumpkins in my entire life!” You could hardly carry them around when they got ripe. So, of course, what happened to the pumpkins? One day I was home from school in the fall and Dad said, “There’s that big green cart you took the wood out to burn; take those pumpkins out and feed them to the pigs.” Oh, that was fun. Threw them at the pigs; hit them in the head and so forth; that was fun. And, of course, they would break and they’d eat them, and so forth; it was a great time.

Again, I mentioned my parents and being home. When I was...at summer time we used to go to catechism at Livermore Sacred Heart Church, and we had a week of catechism and on Saturday it was, like, 9 to 12. In summer times, it was one week. And, I was in the fourth grade and my brother, Tom, was in sixth. And, my mom got worried about me. I don't know why, about getting around the school to go to catechism. So, "Tom I want you to have Roger with you in your class." Well, Tom didn't want me in his class at all and he said, "I don't like this arrangement, but I got to obey Mom; yeah I guess so." I thought, how do I subterfuge this; I'll do it the easy way and I'm going to study, because Tom won't study. I memorized that catechism, you know, the old Baltimore Catechism Lesson; came into class and I kind of showed Tom up. And he, he was so mad at me afterward he said, "Next week I don't care what happens to you, you find your own way to your fourth grade room. I don't care if you die out there; I'm not going to help you." And I said, "Oh, thanks, Tom; this is fantastic. You won't tell Mom will you?" But, Steve and Bob and Mike were my buddies in fourth grade catechism. I didn't want to leave them to go to Tom's group. I didn't know any of those kids and didn't care either.

So, I got Steve interested in raising pumpkins because he liked how big they were, and so forth. And then, I raised corn, Indian corn and popcorn, out in the garden, as well, and would harvest that in the fall and stuff. I had my own little corner of the world. We raised gourds on that west side of the garden, as well, so I loved gourds and I'd buy packages of gored seeds in the winter time. We'd find them in the seed catalog and we'd get them ordered, and I would plant them in the spring when I came home from school.

Then, when I got older, of course, “Well now you know the weeds from the potatoes; go out there and weed the potatoes for me. Go out and weed the corn; go out and weed the cucumbers or water the cucumbers.” I loved little garden tasks, as well.

1:15:00

Erpelding: So, I learned how to garden just kind of by default in many cases. And, I could tell by either touch or smell or height whatever, between a corn plant and a cucumber; very, very easy to tell the difference between those two plants. So, one time we had a hail storm and got pretty well hailed out. Of course, my garden got pretty well hailed out, too. One time, the cows got out and ate all my watermelons, and so you had the ups and downs of the garden. When we moved to Oelwein, of course, my mom had a small garden. We didn’t have acres and acres of ground anymore, so I used to go out and help her in the garden and she’d be cooking lunch, “Roger, go get me an onion from the garden, will you.” So, I’d go out and get her an onion. I’ll never forget the time I planted some yellow beans, and I planted them real late, and I was about ready to go back to school and Mom said, “Can I pick your yellow beans?” And I said, “Mom absolutely not; I raised those to watch them go to seed.” “Well, but it’s supper time, and we need some vegetables.” And I said, “No, Mom those are mine,” and she was so mad at me. “Well, I’m not doing anything for you anymore.” But you know what, she didn’t pick those beans. And I thought, what would I have done if she picked those beans, what could I have done to her? Because, they would have been gone; you couldn’t put them back on the vine.

And, I would have eaten them of course; but she didn't pick them. Of course, they went to seed, and I got to watch beans go to seed. And milkweeds; I love milkweeds. On the west side of the fence was the gourds. We had a fence line, and there was some milkweeds growing there. I call them milk flowers; I love them. And, they'd bloom at the seed and everything else; that was no problem. We had Canadian thistles.

I used to walk beans with my family. I'd put my hands down; I could walk through rows of beans that way. So, my dad always said to me, or all of us, "You know you can miss a milkweed; you can miss a Canadian thistle you can miss a corn but don't you ever, ever miss a cocklebur." And so, cockleburs were easy for me because they were the same color as the beans. Sighted kids had fits, but cockleburs were very rough leaves and very big leaves where the beans have much smaller leaves. I could scout them out pretty easily. My dad would kind of follow along where we'd been, and you didn't want to miss any cockleburs that he found; it was not pretty. We all missed a few. And, I couldn't understand why he even let me let a thistle go to seed on the west side of the fence. Once it bloomed and set to seed pods, and I had to pull it out and throw it away, but I said, "How about a cocklebur, Dad? "No, never, never, never; If I see a cocklebur among the seed I'm going to pull it and I'm going to throw it away, and you will never find it.

When Jack was a little boy, he had a load of dirt hauled in to our property, and low and behold, here came the cockleburs. I thought, "Oh good, here's my chance. My dad can't stop me now...and have them go to seed." And so, pretty soon they set burs and I could see why Dad said what he said. They are the meanest, ugliest things that you'll

ever see and they're sticky. They're as sharp as can be; they're the worst burs around. And, when they began to set burs they went out in the trash can. I wouldn't even compost them; they were so ugly. I said, "Jack, look at these ugly, ugly cocklebur." He called them cockle berries. "If you ever see a cocklebur, tell me. If it doesn't have any burs on it just pull them out. If it has burs on it, you don't want to, because it will get in your hands and you'll be miserable." So I said, "You let me know if there's any cockleburs out here with these on them, and I'll pull them up." I said, "Just feel how ugly they are." "Dad they look ugly." So, they are terribly ugly and terribly sticky and they're sharp as can be. That's why Dad said to get rid of the cockleburs; I can understand that, now.

Even a burdock...let a burdock grow to seed in the north end of the garden one year by the fence, just so I could see what it was like to go to seed. And so, of course, I had a great garden background and the first thing I did when I went to Sioux City was had half of the yard plowed up in my new house, so I could plant a garden. I had Teresa help me, at first, and we'd plant rows, and so forth. And, once I figured out what I could plant where, then I did a lot of it myself. I don't use a whole lot of different tools. I use a Braille yard stick; I use sticks; I use string to mark my rows. I make a little furrow with a hoe and then I plant the seeds in and I can tell if it's going to grow in a row, its okay. One time I said to my mom, "How do I tell when my carrots are up?" And Mom said, "Well, you know what, you'll tell me; then I'll know as well." They are the hardest things to find; they're very, very fine and they're real ferny and she said, "I can't see them either and I'm a sighted woman. The weeds get growing, and they're so fine anyway, and you can't find

them back and they're just tough to find. So, when you figure it out, let me know." So, there are some things that give all of us fits in gardening.

Right now, I got several pots of hyacinths that are, well, some are in the kitchen, some are back in the sun room. Boy, you walk in the door tonight and those will just smell like wonderful. And, I forced some crocus this year when the hyacinths are done; I have some tulips out in the sun room I'm kind of holding back. I'm kind of keeping them in the dark and cold, so they don't grow too fast. I'll bring them by and they'll bloom; then I'm done. My daffodils are done; my paper whites are done; my crocus are done; my hyacinths are fast fading; they'll be done here in a couple of weeks; they'll be all done blooming. I garden all year round. Right next to the hyacinths, I have a little kitchen herb garden. I have three pots of herbs; one chives, one parsley and one basil. I harvest the basil. It's looking pretty bad right now. It's getting new growth on it, so in a few weeks it will be ready to harvest again. I've got to pick chives; they're getting ugly; they're getting tall and leaning over, and so forth. And the parsley, Beth got into it last night, and trimmed it up, and so forth, and that was fine, too. I hadn't used it for a while, and so it got kind of ugly. I don't use a lot of parsley, but it's easy to grow. So, I garden all year round; never quits. And, I can't wait to go outside here. My next mission will be to do a scouting mission; what's up. There are things come up early, Virginia blue bells come up early, surprise lilies come up early, and so do the daffodils and tulips, and so forth, outside...and crocus. So, I'll look for all those things; I know where I planted them, so I'll go from there.

Clarke: I understand that you were in Master Gardening.

Erpelding: I'm a Master Gardener, yes I am. You have to have 40 hours of community work, and I had about 40 hours of classes last year. Now, it's six and six. And, I already have five hours of educational classes, and I got one more hour of that. My volunteer hasn't begun yet, but this spring, Beth and I are going to have a garden at the demonstration gardens, up in Urbandale. So, we'll get our volunteer working then some when we sponsor that garden. We're going to plant it and arrange it, and so forth. We're going to our first meeting on March 15th to plan that out with Margaret; she does all the coordination for the demonstration garden, and so we'll work that in with what she wants to have in that garden this year, and it will be ours to take care of; to water and weed and feed and plant and nurture and deadhead, and the whole ball of wax.

Clarke: So, where do you get the on-going education? Where do you go for that?

Erpelding: Well, there are a variety of places. This year at the Botanical Center, they have what they call Learn on Saturdays, and they'd have two every Saturday through the end of March. And, I've had one on day lilies and iris, I had one called Garden Smarter not Harder and one on alliums, which I really enjoyed. And, there was one on scented geraniums, again, that's a new area for me, scented geraniums. So, I bought three of those and have them out in the sun room now, getting them to grow. And, my fifth one was on, what...I'm drawing a blank. And, I'm taking a sixth

one March fifth, Elwyn Taylor, Gardening and Weather. So, I cannot wait.

Clarke: Gardening and what?

Erpelding: Weather, but Elwyn Taylor is a meteorologist from Iowa State; retired professor [Correction: Mr. Taylor is not retired, to date.] from Iowa State and I cannot wait...but Alliums, geraniums, smarter and iris. Oh, that fifth course on the 12th...I think I have it in my pocket. I kept a list here on a website and I got to look now...oh, Longwood Gardens. The lady that's in charge of the Iowa Arboretum, the internship with Longwood Gardens...and Beth and I were there last September, out near Philadelphia. She presented about Longwood Gardens, how they grow things, and so forth. Mary, they have a conservatory; it's four acres under glass.

Clarke: Oh, my goodness!

Erpelding: And, it was raining cats and dogs, so we spent all our time in the conservatory. Heck, I could live there; man it was cool! We didn't see near all of it.

Clarke: Was there anything else, Roger that you want to share?

Erpelding: You know, Mary, I just can't think. It's been an hour and a half hasn't it?

Clarke: Well, you've had a very full life.

Erpelding: Incredibly, I do have a very full life. I have a wonderful wife. We have four kids; three of them are hers, one of them is mine, and all four of them are ours. I have a house, a job, of course, and a garden. And, not only are we in the Master Gardener program, but we both go to St. Teresa's and we lector, and Beth is Eucharistic minister, and we do some faith sharing. "On the Journey Together," it's called right now. We'll be in the fourth session of that beginning Sunday night at our house. We're also sponsors for...we do marriage preparation, couple sponsorship, and we're in a group called Teams of Our Lady; it's a marriage support group. We're involved in all that kind of stuff.

Clarke: A well rounded life, for sure.

Erpelding: Oh, yeah. Love it, Mary; love it!

Clarke: Well, thank you, Roger! It was really very interesting!

1:26:37

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

4-12-11